

ON PAGE

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Casey Reportedly Directed North's Contra Aid Effort

Lent CIA Staff, Equipment, Advised on Evading Congress, Officials Say

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WASHINGTON—Former CIA Director William J. Casey personally directed White House aide Oliver L. North's effort to aid the Nicaraguan contras during the two years when Congress prohibited U.S. military assistance to them, Administration officials and former associates of North said Friday.

Casey supervised North's secret program to place American military trainers in the contras' camps in Honduras, lent CIA staff and equipment to the training scheme and gave North advice on how to evade congressional restrictions on such aid, they told The Times.

"Ollie was reporting to Casey," one former North associate said. "Casey hired [the chief trainer in Honduras]. He asked Ollie to find someone who could run the program for him."

Details of Involvement

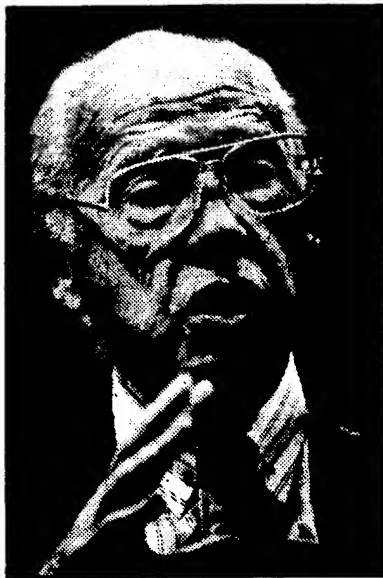
The accounts provide the first details of CIA officers' involvement in training and logistical support for the contras while military aid was prohibited from 1984 until last year.

And they suggest for the first time that Casey, who resigned last month and is now hospitalized with a brain tumor, was acting outside his capacity as CIA director when he supervised North's clandestine military aid program.

"I don't think it was mainly an agency operation," said Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman David L. Boren (D-Okla.). "I tend to think that it was Bill Casey as an individual. I think he really wanted to keep the skirts of his agency very clean."

At least two Americans under contract to the CIA provided military training to the contras without the knowledge of Congress' intelligence committees, sources said.

One of the trainers hired by



BERNIE BOSTON / Los Angeles Times

William J. Casey

Casey and North supervised both weapons training and the distribution of supplies at the contras' main training base at Yamales in southern Honduras, several sources said. Another CIA trainer ran a small parachute school at the contras' air base at Aguacate in eastern Honduras, two sources said.

In addition, some CIA officers who were officially assigned to provide the contras with intelligence assistance went beyond that mission to give the rebels tactical advice and training, several officials and contra sources said.

"We know that the CIA guys bent the rules to help us," a senior contra official said. "We are very grateful for it."

Administration officials and other Americans involved in the effort said, however, that much of the secret aid effort was not run by the CIA itself. Instead, they said, Casey and a handful of aides ran the effort "off the books," often using private citizens and funds, in an attempt to evade Congress' overseeing CIA operations.

"They were very careful to make sure that the letter of the law was being observed," a knowledgeable official said. "Either Ollie hired people privately or, if it was an agency person, it was done in a way in which the guy was operating beyond authority."

"They built in deniability... with malice aforethought," he said.

Congress' intelligence panels and the special committees investigating the Iran-contra scandal are making Casey's role in the secret aid effort a major focus of their inquiries, members of the committees said.

Personal Role Suspected

Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman Boren is one who suspects that Casey was, in effect, running his own personal operations on the contras' behalf—outside the regular structure of the CIA.

Asked how a distinction could be drawn between Casey's actions as director of central intelligence and his actions as an individual, Boren said: "That's a good question."

A CIA spokeswoman Kathy Pherson said the agency would have no comment on the accounts of Casey's actions. "We complied with all congressional restrictions," she said. "I can't go beyond that."

It is unclear whether it was legal for the CIA to hire and pay trainers for the contras during the two years, ending last Oct. 1, when Congress prohibited military aid to the rebels.

Members of the Senate and House intelligence committees have said they believe such aid was prohibited. But last year, John M. Poindexter, then President Reagan's national security adviser, obtained a memorandum from the President's Intelligence Oversight Board arguing that U.S. military training was legal as long as it did not extend to "the planning or execution of military or paramilitary operations in Nicaragua."

Contra officials and Americans who were involved in the effort said the CIA had trainers at both Yamales and Aguacate.

At Yamales, the agency officers

Continued

supervised both basic and advanced military training for contra units. "Most of the training was at a very low level," said a former U.S. official who visited the camps.

But the contras were grateful. "They did a terrific job," one said. "It was very important for us. The CIA men worked very hard. During the week they trained our men, and on Saturday afternoons they put their earphones on and went to the target range and took target practice themselves."

At Aguacate, a CIA officer trained contras in parachute jumps from both a helicopter and an airplane, according to contra officials and an American crewman on one of the rebels' secret supply flights.

"They asked if they could borrow our Caribou [cargo plane]," said the crewman, Iain Crawford of Fayetteville, N.C. "I said sure. It was only six guys. It didn't seem like a big deal."

In addition to the training, however, CIA officers—including the chief trainer at Yamales—helped supervise the contras' transport and distribution of weapons delivered by North's secret aid network, three sources said.

And several CIA officers appear to have violated Congress' prohibition against giving specific tactical advice to the contras, U.S. and contra officials said.

"A lot of guys in their 30s are going to get reprimands in their files for going beyond intelligence to advice, and that's sad," the former senior official said. "It's awfully hard to be down there in the field with kids who are fighting and dying and not give them help where they need it. That's not the real world."

Boren said: "There were clearly individual cases of lapses."

What remains unsettled, Boren and other congressional sources say, is whether Casey and other senior CIA officials will be found to have violated Congress' rules, or whether they successfully "insu-

lated" the agency by putting North in charge of the effort. North worked for the White House National Security Council staff until he was fired last November.

One Administration official said Casey and North met regularly on the contra program as early as 1984, the year Congress cut off U.S. aid. "Casey was involved from the beginning," he said. "... Everyone [at the CIA] snapped to attention when Ollie called out there." Congressional sources said, however, that they do not expect to be able to question Casey, who has been hospitalized with complications from an operation last year to remove a brain tumor.

The CIA's own inspector general has been examining the program in Honduras and Congress' investigating committees plan to question the agency officers involved.

Several sources said they expect the panels' scrutiny to focus on three CIA officials: Clair George, deputy director for operations; Duane R. Clarridge, who ran the contra program until 1984 and then acted as North's "case officer," according to one knowledgeable source, and the chief of the CIA's Central America task force, who reportedly supervised agency officers' aid to North's effort.

The chief of the CIA's Central America task force cannot be named under the Foreign Intelligence Agents Identities Act, which prohibits divulging the names of clandestine U.S. intelligence operatives.

Costa Rican Action Told

The CIA's former station chief in Costa Rica already has charged that senior agency officials authorized him to help North associates build and operate an airstrip in that country, knowledgeable sources said. The officer, who was recalled from his post after his actions were discovered, has told the grand jury probing the scandal that he believes both George and the Central America operations chief approved

of his actions, one source said.

In contrast, officials said, the agency's station chiefs in El Salvador and Honduras are not under suspicion of violating Congress' guidelines.

Staff writer Michael Wines contributed to this article.